



# A Pathway to Economic Opportunity for Communities and AmeriCorps Members

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The Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) AmeriCorps program offers individuals the opportunity to serve communities and engage with residents while also developing skills that can benefit their future career paths and educational goals. But how can sites where program members are placed and local LISC offices ensure these members have a positive experience and see lasting benefits from their service?

The Urban Institute (Urban) contracted with LISC to examine the effects of AmeriCorps service and the occupational and educational outcomes tied to service and civic engagement in an effort to design and implement improved programming and technical assistance for our partners. This study is the third commissioned by LISC in recent years. LISC has previously contracted with external evaluators to conduct evaluations focusing on (1) the impact of the LISC AmeriCorps program on organizations that serve as host sites for members, and (2) the impact of the program on recipients of service provided by Financial Opportunity Centers. The purpose of this study is to focus on the benefits of service to the AmeriCorps members themselves, and how the structure, design, and management of the LISC AmeriCorps program contribute to members' outcomes.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What occupational and educational outcomes post-service do members attain, and do members experience changes in attitudes and behaviors pertaining to personal efficacy and civic engagement that appear to be related to their volunteer experience?
2. What, if any, social, demographic, and attitudinal attributes of individuals are related to these outcomes?

3. What attributes of the LISC AmeriCorps site recruitment and selection process influence, if at all, the types of members selected into the program and their match to placement sites?
4. What characteristics of the placement partner are associated with positive member outcomes, including the type of assignment and varieties of member management and supervision?
5. What aspects of national and local LISC program management, including the supports given to both the member and the placement partner, are associated with different placement partner practices and member outcomes?

This evaluation used the following methodology and survey instruments:

- Pre-post design for member outcomes
- Quantitative and qualitative analysis
- Member data: baseline survey (response rate: 70.6%), end of year survey conducted by CNCS (response rate: 66.3%), and follow-up survey 6 months post-service (response rate: 48.5%)<sup>1</sup>
- Placement site data from web-based survey (response rate: 71.3%)
- Operating site (local LISC office) data from semi-structured interviews
- Administrative data as a source of member demographics
- A quasi-experimental comparison, using propensity score matching and data from the CNCS exit survey, to compare outcomes for LISC AmeriCorps members to those of other AmeriCorps programs

## Structure and Management of LISC AmeriCorps Programs

### The Mission and Role of LISC

LISC is a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). Together with locally based not-for-profit partners, LISC strengthens local economies to attract and expand business, improve housing quality and affordability, create living wage jobs, and prepare talent for quality employment. LISC has a multi-layer operating structure that includes collaboration among those who work at the national level and local level.

LISC employs a multi-layered approach to delivering resources including: loans, grants and equity investments; local, statewide and national policy support; and technical and management assistance. Delivered primarily through a local LISC office structure, LISC has 33 local offices, and works in rural communities in 1400 counties in 44 states. Locally based LISC staff in these offices work with not-for-profit partners, government agencies, and other philanthropic entities to help identify local priorities and challenges to deliver the most appropriate support to meet the needs.

## **LISC AmeriCorps' Connection to LISC's Overall Mission**

The AmeriCorps program is a critical component to LISC's overall Catalyzing Opportunity strategy. LISC sponsors a national LISC AmeriCorps program. LISC first received AmeriCorps funding in 1994 and is currently in its 24th year. The program helps improve the capacity of not-for-profit community development agencies working in underinvested communities.

The AmeriCorps members are placed in a variety of not-for-profit organizations that help low-income and underinvested people obtain employment, achieve housing stability, build affordable housing, engage community members in efforts to create safer and healthier neighborhoods, and develop community plans. These organizations are the backbone of underinvested communities, and AmeriCorps members help these organizations expand their capacity to increase the opportunity for the people they serve.

The LISC AmeriCorps program is directly aligned with the Corporation for National and Community Services' AmeriCorps mission to "engage AmeriCorps members in direct service and capacity-building to address unmet community needs. AmeriCorps members also mobilize community volunteers and strengthen the capacity of the organizations where they serve."

LISC has successfully trained members through service with the skills to become employed post service. The hope is that service coupled with intentional training will prepare individuals—primarily people who self-identify as from a community of color and live in the neighborhood that they serve—to take on careers in the field.

Since 1994, LISC has trained and placed over 3,000 members in the community development industry across the country. These members have helped over 7,500 people obtain employment, supported the development of over 10,000 units of housing, and helped stabilize the housing situation of over 49,000 families.

## **The LISC AmeriCorps Program Model**

LISC operates a national direct program grant where LISC National (National) works with local LISC offices and programs (Operating Site) to place a cohort of AmeriCorps member(s) with local partner organizations (Host or Placement Site). Local LISC offices receive an allocation of member slots/positions with a suggested minimum size of seven—five full-time positions and two quarter-time positions. There is no maximum size; however, National provides guidance to Operating Sites on time and effort implications for larger cohort sizes.

LISC National is comprised of four FTE positions. Operating sites have one staff person responsible for the management of their cohort that spends anywhere from 20 percent to 80 percent of their time on the program based on size of the cohort. Host sites have one person on staff designated as the member's immediate supervisor.

LISC National provides Operating Sites with competitive selection materials, including standardized materials related to member service descriptions and goal setting, for the selection of host sites. LISC operating sites are responsible for the competitive selection of partner sites, vetting of member candidates, and supervision of the local AmeriCorps team. Operating sites are also responsible for relationship management with the partner site as it relates to the AmeriCorps program. Host sites are responsible for recruitment of and the day-to-day management of the AmeriCorps member. All three play a role in ensuring member compliance and participation eligibility. The LISC AmeriCorps program aims to expose women and people of color to the community development field while simultaneously building the capacity of the placement partners. The LISC AmeriCorps program starts on October 1 and seeks to have all members end service by September 30. However, accommodations are made for operating sites and host partners to have full-time and half-time members serve beyond September 30.

LISC AmeriCorps members fall into four categories:

- Full-time members serve 1,700 hours for a 10-month term starting on October 1;
- Part-time members serve 900 hours for a 10-month term starting on October 1;
- Quarter-time members serve 450 hours and can serve as few as three months and as many as 10 months starting as early as October 1 and as late as July 1; and,
- Minimum (or summer) time members who serve 300 hours for as many as five months or as few as two months starting no earlier than May 1 and as late as August 1.

Both the local operating sites and National provide members with required and optional opportunities for training and development. LISC National requires all members receive an onboarding to AmeriCorps service by the operating site at the onset of the term. National budgets for and provides a one and a half day, in person onboarding utilizing a cohort training (day one is members only and on day two immediate host site supervisors join members). National budgets for and requires that all full-time and half-time members attend the annual Leadership Conference, which is the second training hallmark. Local operating sites require all members enrolled to attend monthly meetings and trainings as identified by the cohort and supervisor. Host sites provide structured training (NeighborWorks, local industry training, etc.) and “on-the-job” training (staff meetings, community meetings, etc.). Host site supervisors are expected to have regular check-ins.

## Key Findings

### 2016-2017 Program Year Characteristics

Our evaluation of 15 operating sites and 128 placement sites found:

- Of the 166 members at the start of the program, 133 successfully completed their terms

- Nearly 81 percent of placement sites are community-based organizations, and 30 percent operate other AmeriCorps programs
- Local office staff raised the following challenges:
  - » Low stipends make it difficult to recruit quality members with the appropriate skills to meet the needs of the potential placement site
  - » The expectations or needs of placement organizations may not match the amount of funding dedicated to pay candidates who can meet those needs

LISC AmeriCorps members have the following self-identified characteristics:

- Most (69 percent) are female
- Most are black/African American (41 percent) or white (34 percent)
- Most (51.5 percent) have earned a bachelor's degree or higher at the time they apply
- About half are between the ages of 22 and 29 at enrollment; the average member is 30.6 years old
- Most have six or more years of work history (only 17 percent enter the program without any work history)
- Two-thirds of entering members reported they earn less than \$20,000 a year
- Nearly two-thirds (67 percent) reported living in the same neighborhood where they served
- About 83 percent of members earned an education award (a post-service benefit awarded to service members who complete an approved term of national service through AmeriCorps)

## Evaluating Outcomes for LISC AmeriCorps members

We studied members' outcomes in four categories—occupational, educational, civic engagement, and personal efficacy—to evaluate what elements of the program contributed to their success.

Table 1: Key Outcome Definitions and Measures

Outcome	Measures
Occupational Outcomes: the extent to which AmeriCorps helped to define and shape an individual's professional goals	<p>Survey question asking what the member had done in the 6 months immediately following LISC AmeriCorps</p> <p>Self-assessed influence of service on forming and making progress toward professional goals</p> <p>Improvement of job skills</p>

Educational Outcomes: the extent to which AmeriCorps helped define and shape an individual's educational goals.	Degrees earned  Self-assessed influence of service on forming and making progress toward educational goals
Civic Engagement: Attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors consistent with active involvement in community life, such as participating in community organizations or voting in national and local elections	Participate in community organizations (school, religious, issue-based, recreational)  Keep informed about news and public issues  Volunteer for a cause or issue that you care about  Donate money or goods to a cause or issue that you care about  Participate in an activity or group to keep the community safe and clean  Vote in elections
Personal Efficacy: the ways in which service helps members increase their effectiveness at working with others	Connection to community  Innovation and teamwork  Interpersonal relations  Management skills  Problem-solving abilities and techniques

## Occupational Outcomes

After exiting the program, most LISC AmeriCorps members (79 percent) were satisfied with the professional training that they received on the job, reporting that it was either excellent or good. Most members also reported that the program helped them develop 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and management skills.

Participation in LISC AmeriCorps had a positive influence on members':

- **Professional goals:** Eighty percent of members said their service affected the pathways they chose; 97 percent said their service made them more interested in the types of jobs they pursued, and 86 percent said their service helped them develop or expand their personal goals for occupational attainment.
- **Career-oriented soft skills:** Most members credited their service experience with helping them improve their innovation and teamwork skills, as well as helping them build management skills

and other essential job skills such as planning, funding, budgeting, and staffing an organization; effectively communicating with diverse populations; project management; time management; and critical thinking.

- **Employment six months post-service:** Seventy-three percent reported being employed or self-employed six months after their service ended (with most being employed in the nonprofit sector). Ten percent reported continuing another term of AmeriCorps service either with LISC (6.3 percent) or with another AmeriCorps program (3.8 percent). And 7.2 percent reported being unemployed and not in school.

In general, member demographic and pre-service characteristics had little to no effect on employment outcomes, suggesting that these positive gains were broadly distributed among different kinds of people. Some of these variables, however, did account for variation in career-oriented soft skills including innovation and teamwork, management skills, and problem-solving ability. The most common demographic factors related to differences in these outcomes were earning an education award and prior work experience. For instance, those who earned an education award were more likely to figure out the next steps for their career and professional goals.

#### HOW PLACEMENT SITES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS' CAREERS

- **Catalyze members' enthusiasm and provide them opportunities for broadening their networks:** Sites with higher ratings of member enthusiasm and interest, and sites where members fostered partnerships with other organizations were less likely to have members unemployed six months after their service ended.
- **Maintain stability:** Sites with more leadership stability had greater impacts on their members' career choices.
- **Cultivate an environment where members can thrive:** When sites described their members' attributes more positively, members reported at higher levels that their service had an impact on their career choices.
- **Partner with other organizations and offer members opportunities to participate:** Sites where members contributed toward fostering partnerships with other organizations were more likely to have members report higher scores on innovation and teamwork measures.

#### HOW LOCAL LISC OPERATING OFFICES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS' CAREERS

- **Encourage collaboration with other groups:** Research question 5 asks how the working relationship between the local operating offices and the placement sites can influence the management practices used by placement partners, and the outcomes experienced by members. When placement sites report more interactions with other organizations through their involvement in LISC AmeriCorps, members are more likely to report that their service increased their innovation and teamwork skills.

## Educational Outcomes

Members overwhelmingly reported that participating in LISC AmeriCorps was a worthwhile experience for their educational, professional, and personal goals.

Participation in LISC AmeriCorps had a positive influence on members':

- **Education pathways:** Nearly 86 percent of members responding to questions focused on LISC AmeriCorps' impact on their education pathway said the education award made it possible for them to continue their education. Eighty-two percent said it helped them develop or expand their personal goals for education.
- **Lives six months post-service:** Six months after their service ended, 20 percent of members reported continuing their education in either technical training (2.5 percent), undergraduate/community college (10.1 percent), or graduate school (7.6 percent).

Overall, there were few strong patterns between education outcomes and demographic or other member characteristics at the start of service. Members who were living in the neighborhood where they served were more likely to report they figured out their next steps in terms of educational goals.

### HOW PLACEMENT SITES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS' EDUCATION

- **Develop skills:** In sites that focused on improving members' teamwork or leadership skills, members said their service had a greater impact on their educational choices.
- **Encourage a positive culture:** In sites that rated their members more highly on enthusiasm and energy, ability to work within the AmeriCorps jobs description, ability to work with others, and effectiveness in supporting the overall mission and goals of the organization, members said their service had a greater impact on their educational choices.

### HOW LOCAL LISC OPERATING OFFICES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS' EDUCATION

- **Build a reputation of respect and reliability:** Members are more likely to report their service in LISC AmeriCorps affected their educational outcomes when their placement site believes the local LISC office takes its opinions seriously, is serving its purpose, and can be counted on to meet its obligations.

## Civic Engagement and Personal Efficacy Outcomes

Members credited their service in LISC AmeriCorps with increasing their connection to their community and the likelihood they will participate in community organizations, keep informed about news and public events, and volunteer for causes they care about. Participation in LISC AmeriCorps has a positive effect on members':

- **Connection to community:** The average score on the questions about members' awareness, attachment, and contributions to their local communities increased from 3.94 at entry (on a 1-5 scale) to 4.47 several months after completing service.

- **Problem-solving techniques:** At follow-up, members were asked how much their AmeriCorps service helped them improve their ability to use several problem-solving techniques. The average score across all these questions was 3.26 on a scale of 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“a great deal”).
- **Civic engagement:** The follow-up survey also asked members whether they performed six important civic activities more or less frequently than they did before enrolling in LISC AmeriCorps. The average score on these questions was 2.35 on a 1-3 scale, where 1 is “less frequently,” 2 is “about as often,” and 3 is “more frequently.”

Nearly all members reported a high appreciation for the benefits of diversity after completing their service; the average score on four questions about appreciating diversity was 4.67 (on a 1-5 scale) at exit, and 4.62 at follow-up. In addition, appreciation for diversity is found to be a key outcome fostered by the LISC AmeriCorps experience. Our analysis of propensity score matching reveals that LISC AmeriCorps members exit the program with a greater appreciation of diversity than members of other AmeriCorps programs.

Responses related to civic engagement and personal efficacy varied by member demographics:

- Respondents with lower-to-middle incomes were more likely to report that they gained an understanding of solutions to the challenges faced by the community.
- Female respondents were less likely to “strongly agree” that they were aware of the important needs in the community or that they had a personal obligation to contribute to the community.
- Black respondents were more likely to agree with the statement that they plan to become actively involved in issues affecting the community.
- Respondents who received an education award were more likely to report they contributed to the community.
- Female respondents were more likely to report they made a difference in the community.
- Respondents with higher incomes were less likely to report they reexamined their beliefs and attitudes about other people.

## HOW PLACEMENT SITES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS’ CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL EFFICACY

- **Improve relationships with other organizations:** When the placement sites say members helped the site improve relationships with other organizations in the community, members report higher civic engagement outcomes.
- **Stay open to new opportunities:** When the placement sites report the members helped them expand into new program areas, members are more likely to vote.

- **Focus on teamwork:** When the placement sites prioritize working with others, members are more likely to report an improvement in their ability to work with others.

## HOW LOCAL LISC OPERATING OFFICES CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE MEMBERS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL EFFICACY

- **Collaborate between offices and sites:** When the placement sites say they effectively collaborate with the local office, their members are more likely to report higher levels on the impact of service measure relationship. This is a measure of the small but significant personal accomplishments (e.g., “the majority of my work has made a positive difference in the community”; “I have done things I never thought I could do”) that members might experience.
- **Develop a fruitful partnership:** When the placement sites feel that the collaboration with the local office has been fruitful, they are more likely to give their members high marks for ability to work with others, ability to work independently, interest and enthusiasm for assigned work, quality of work produced, and quantity of work produced.
- **Expand organizational networks:** When placement sites feel that the collaboration with the local office helps broaden their organizational networks, members are more likely to feel that AmeriCorps service was a “defining” personal and professional experience.

## Conclusion

Overall, members experienced substantial benefits to participation in LISC AmeriCorps and said their service made a positive contribution to their educational, professional, and personal goals. Members reported that participation in LISC AmeriCorps helped them figure out the next step in their career and education choices. And participation in LISC AmeriCorps led members to be more likely to volunteer and participate in community organizations.

In general, members' demographics, skills, and beliefs at the start of service did not affect their outcomes revealing these benefits were evenly distributed across demographic characteristics. The factors affecting their outcomes included what their placement site prioritized and how it interacted with its LISC operating office. Placement sites can improve their members' outcomes by encouraging enthusiasm among members, maintaining leadership stability, partnering with other organizations and encouraging members to participate, and focusing on teamwork among members.

The study's findings are limited in terms of generalizability because they covered outcomes during a single program year. In addition, the limited sample size made it more challenging to detect statistically significant associations between outcomes and member demography, host site characteristics, and program management.

Nevertheless, the results suggest that LISC operating offices can positively influence members' outcomes by ensuring their partner AmeriCorps placement site views their collaboration as successful and views the operating office as meeting its obligations. LISC operating offices can also improve their

collaboration with placement sites by offering opportunities to interact with other organizations through participation in LISC AmeriCorps. In qualitative interviews, local offices stressed the importance of finding potential sites that understand and can adhere to the goals, mission, and vision of LISC. Many program administrators feel that a site that is familiar and in agreement with LISC values is more likely to select and supervise a quality member. By following these recommendations, placement sites and local LISC operating offices can optimize the chances that their AmeriCorps' members will benefit from the program, even after their service ends.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We chose this question as our primary data source for post-service career activities over two other alternatives. The follow-up survey also asks members what they are doing now (both questions are select all that apply), while LISC also collects administrative data from their members after they have completed their service, but only assigns one status to each member. We use Question Q15 as our data source because it gives all members a six-month post-service time frame; since the term end date varies widely for LISC AmeriCorps members, having the post-service period be six months is useful.

## About the Authors

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Before joining Urban, Dietz served as senior program manager at the Partnership for Public Service, associate director for research and evaluation at the Corporation for National and Community Service, and an assistant professor of political science in the School of Public Affairs at American University.

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